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Walther in the Pulpit

By F. R. WEBBER

A clergyman's working library is a good measure of the man. In the first four volumes of *Lehre und Wehre* may be found a series of 22 articles, some of them lengthy, in which Walther discusses the books that he considers essential. He does not say so directly, yet it is implied that these are the books that Walther found most useful in his own sermon preparation. It is a significant fact that his long list of books (most of them in the Latin language), does not contain a single book of sermons other than Luther's *Kirchen- und Haus-Postille*.

If we would know how Walther prepared the admirable sermons to be found in the eight or more good-sized printed volumes and the many pamphlets bearing his name, one need only read carefully the 22 articles in *Lehre und Wehre*.

At the head of his list he places Luther's Works. He describes the Walch, Erlangen, Leipzig, Altenburg, Jena, and Wittenberg editions. The superb Weimar edition of almost 100 bulky quarto volumes had not begun to appear in 1855. Walther owned the 24-volume Walch edition, and his set is now the property of Mr. Arne Pettersen, Crestwood, N. Y. Later Walther seems to have had the Erlangen edition, the 102 volumes of which were not quite completed at his death. His writings contain citations from the Erlangen edition.

Space does not permit mention of more than a few of the books in Walther's list. He mentions the works on isagogics by Buddeus and Gerhard, the books on exegetics by Glassius, Leopold, Stock, and Pastor and six works on the Hebrew and Greek

texts. In hermeneutics he mentions five titles, but J. C. K. von Hofmann is not among them. Both Walther and Pieper abhorred Von Hofmann's neo-rationalism. Walther includes the magnificent *Harmoniae Evangelicae* (Magdeburg, 1764), begun by Chemnitz, continued by Leyser, and completed by Gerhard. This splendid work, almost unknown nowadays, should by all means be translated into English in its unabridged form. It is more useful to the sermon maker than 100 books of sermons.

Walther believed that a good background of dogmatics is essential in sermon preparation, but his titles in this field are disappointing. He lists Gerhard, Baier, and Hunnius, but omits Chemnitz, Calovius, Hutter, and a score of other great names. Many other titles follow: works on apologetics, polemics, ethics, moral philosophy, church history, patristics, history of doctrine, homiletics, liturgics, catechetics, pastoral theology, history of philosophy, concordances, dictionaries, and other works. In homiletics he mentions Rambach and Palmer. He declares that Luther's *Kirchen- und Haus-Postille* is a must in the work of sermon preparation. He speaks highly of Heinrich Müller's expository work on the Gospels and Epistles, but warns against his allegorizing. He praises a German exposition of the liturgical Gospels, based upon the Chemnitz-Leyser-Gerhard harmony.

Many volumes of sermons by the world's greatest preachers existed in Walther's day, but Luther is the only one whose printed sermons he includes in his list of

essential homiletical tools. To Walther the preparation of a good sermon did not involve a reading of the printed sermons of Herberger, Gerhard, Andreae, the Carpzovs, Bengel or Mosheim, or of the noted French, Scottish, English, and Welsh pulpit orators. To Walther the correct equipment for sermon making included a pen, an inkstand, and a row of books devoted to the Hebrew and Greek texts. Such reference works never reveal themselves in Walther's finished sermons. One may read his sermons for days without finding a Hebrew or Greek word or any evidence that the original language of the Bible was anything other than German.

Although he never quotes them in any of his sermons, yet Walther must have worked with Johann Gerhard's *Loci theologici*, as well as with Baier's *Compendium*. Walther's apt definitions recall Baier, even though he never borrows Baier's wording. His skill in supporting doctrinal statements with convincing prooftexts is reminiscent of Gerhard and other 17th-century writers.

As early as the year 1840, when he was but 29 years old, Walther had developed a distinctive style. His sermons began with a Trinitarian salutation, often 2 John 3. Then came a prayer, usually about twice as long as the Lord's Prayer. Following this was an introduction, often two large printed pages long. Next was the reading of the entire Gospel for the day. Occasionally there was another paragraph or two of introduction or even a prayer. The theme and the main divisions followed. Sometimes his theme was short, but more often it was two or more printed lines in length. One theme is 25 words long.

Walther's general rule was to use but two main divisions, although he often used three, and now and then four. In checking his *Gnadenjahr*, the sermons of which cover a period of 43 years, it is found that of the 65 sermons, 48 have two main divisions, 14 have three, and three have four divisions. In his *Evangelien Postille*, of the 69 sermons, 45 have two divisions, 23 have three, and one has four divisions. Sometimes his main divisions were lengthy, such as "Why the believing Christian should rejoice at the glad tidings of our Lord Jesus Christ's resurrection." Sometimes his main divisions are brief, as in his Cantate sermon: "1. Of Sin; 2. Of Righteousness; 3. Of Judgment"; and his yet more terse Trinity XXIV sermon: "1. Sin; 2. Death."

Walther always drew his material from the Scriptures, and the great doctrine of justification by grace through faith ran like a golden thread through all his sermons. He paid no heed to pulpit fads. Abolition, the Civil War, and Reconstruction occupied the minds of the neighboring sectarian clergymen, but all through these periods Walther never failed to preach Christ-centered, Redemption-centered, and text-centered sermons. He had definite opinions in regard to current issues, but he gave priority to the great teachings of Holy Scripture. He never set aside the Christian year in favor of national holidays or secular occasions, although, on one occasion at least, he delivered a typical spread-eagle Fourth of July address before his young people. This is included in his *Festklänge* (St. Louis, 1892). Such things as a cornerstone laying, a church dedication, an organ dedication, a new peal of bells, or a church anniversary always called for a special sermon, but on such occasions

there were always two or more services, and at one of these the Gospel or the Epistle supplied the theme. In 1843 he preached a special sermon upon the occasion of the conversion of a Roman Catholic priest.

Walther always observed the Christian year. At just the time when the Lutherans in southeastern Pennsylvania and Maryland were doing everything possible to discard all Lutheran customs and to conform in every way to the customs of the sectarians, Walther not only preached upon the usual Sunday Gospel and Epistle pericopes, but his printed sermon collections disclose the fact that he observed Christmas matins, Christmas Day, Second Christmas Day, Purification, Easter Day, Second Easter Day, Pentecost, the Annunciation, the Visitation, St. John the Baptist's Day, Saint Michael's Day, and, of course, Lent and Holy Week. (*Evangelien Postille, Licht des Lebens*, etc.)

This devotion to the Christian year was not mere traditionalism. The late Timothy Stone used to say that the keeping of a festival for the sake of a festival is a farce. Walther valued the Christian year, its Sundays, and its festival days solely because of the important truths that their appointed Gospels and Epistles emphasized. He preached joyous sermons on Transfiguration Sunday, not because it was Transfiguration Sunday, but because the Gospel for the day tells of the Lord, whose glory was allowed to shine forth in great splendor, even in His days of humiliation.

Walther's devotion to the Scriptures and his eloquent declaration of their teachings bore fruit. It was somewhat of an achievement to assume the pastorate of a small group of emigrants, worshipping in a bor-

rowed basement, and in less than two years to build and dedicate his first church building, a structure of moderate size, in the prevailing Greek Revival style, and within seven or eight years see his membership grow to just short of 3,000, and this in a village of but 16,000 to 20,000 inhabitants. With his new church hopelessly outgrown, Walther established Immanuel, Holy Cross, and Zion as branch congregations. Trinity, the mother congregation, continued to grow, and the church building in Lombard Street was succeeded in 1865 by a fine Gothic church, cruciform in plan, with a tower and lofty spire, a peal of bells, a tower clock, and a fine organ with 34 ranks of pipes.

All this was accomplished by means of carefully prepared sermons, delivered with animation. Walther had far too many irons in the fire to permit even the necessary mission calls, nor had he time to issue publicity material. The seminary that he had helped establish in Altenburg in 1839 had been moved to St. Louis in 1849. Walther had the construction of the new seminary building to oversee and his classes to meet. He had established *Der Lutheraner* in 1844 and *Lehre und Wehre* in 1855. He wrote the leading articles for both publications. The bound files bear witness to the fact that Walther was very thorough in all that he did. His essays in *Lehre und Wehre* give evidence of painstaking research. The pages devoted to church news prove that he was in close touch with Lutherans of all synods and with Lutherans throughout Europe. He corresponded frequently with Lutheran leaders throughout America and Europe. He wrote many essays for synodical and conference meetings and for free conferences. He helped

establish a printery which grew into Concordia Publishing House. He wrote books and pamphlets, and even wrote hymns now and then, both the words and music. All this he did himself, writing everything in longhand in ink. How he found time to prepare and write in full such excellent sermons as one may find in his many large volumes remains unexplained. He must have worked day and night. After the year 1849 he did not preach every Sunday at Trinity. Others helped him, yet on such occasions Walther often played the big organ in his own church or else in one of the three affiliated churches.

With this multitude of duties, it is a surprising thing that Walther's sermons have a uniformly high excellence. Each one is a work of fine craftsmanship. John Summerfield, whose dazzling career ended at the age of 27, left but fragments of sermons. George Whitefield, one of the greatest pulpit orators of all time, left hardly a complete sermon. John Kennedy of Dingwall, the famous Scottish preacher, was superb in the pulpit, but his printed sermons are poor affairs. Not so with Walther. He wrote every sermon in full and remained at his desk until the sermon was complete in every respect. Each one is a gem.

Walther has been called rhetorical. This is not correct. When compared to other preachers of his day, Walther's preaching was simple and direct. When the great Scottish Dr. Chalmers preached, his oratory rarely failed to bring his hearers to their feet—literally—during his impassioned peroration. People crowded even the attic of Free St. John's, Edinburgh, to hear the silver-tongued Thomas Guthrie. Beecher knew every trick of the popular platform

speaker, and he was a sensationalist. Talmage was a flowery trafficker in words. Seiss was a showman, who draped a silk handkerchief over one hand and then buried his face in it as he offered a silent pulpit prayer. Many such men existed in Walther's day, and let no man say that Walther was flowery or rhetorical. When judged against the background of his generation, he was humble of spirit and simple in his language. He knew that an honest exposition of God's inspired Word, Law and Gospel, had power of itself, and needed no snappy epigrams, no quotations from Shakespeare or Ella Wheeler Wilcox, and no anecdotes or other forms of dotage to make it effective. He avoided catchy subjects. Walther lived in a day of great preaching; but he excelled all the sectarians in the matter of evangelical content. In our own circles, only Dr. George Stoeckhardt could equal him (and sometimes excel him), in this respect.

While Walther almost always constructed his sermons with the framework of Luther's Explanation of the Second Article in mind, yet one finds exceptions to this rule. In a sermon on the Epistle for Trinity XI, he sets aside the account of our Lord's appearances after His resurrection and uses the following theme and main divisions: "What Must a Christian Do in Order that He May Not Be Led Astray and Be Eternally Lost Because of the Good Appearance of Prevailing Errors? 1. He must, above all, hold fast to the fundamental truths as he has learned them from the Gospel; 2. He must abide always by the correct teachings of the Scripture; 3. He must let the testimony of approved teachers of the church strengthen his faith; 4. He must, in deep humility, despair of his own trustworthiness and wisdom."

Walther's sermons were not the 15-minute tepid essays that one hears so often nowadays. His sermon on the Trinity V Gospel (*Gnadenjahr*, pp. 358—367), when typed on 8½"×11" paper, requires 18 pages, double spaced, or about 4,360 words.

The printed volumes of sermons by Walther include: *Amerikanisch-Lutherische Evangelien Postille* (St. Louis, 1871), a large handsome volume containing sermons on the Christian year Gospels; *Amerikanisch-Lutherische Epistel Postille* (St. Louis, 1882), a companion volume to the Gospel sermons; *Casual-Predigten und Reden* (St. Louis, 1889), a large volume of 616 pages with sermons on texts not of the Christian year, edited by H. Sieck; *Licht des Lebens* (St. Louis, 1905), a large volume of 688 pages, with a series of sermons on the Christian year Gospels, but not those of the *Evang. Postille*, edited by C. J. O. Hanser; *Gnadenjahr* (St. Louis, 1890), a book of 590 pages with yet another series of sermons on the church year Gospels, edited by C. L. Janzow; *Festklänge* (St. Louis, 1892), 473 pages with 58 sermons on the Gospels of the Christian year, edited by C. L. Janzow; *Lutherische Brosamen* (St. Louis, 1876), 608 pages, containing 59 sermons that appeared originally in pamphlet form or in church papers, between 1847 and 1876, including 32 sermons preached before Synod, or at mission festivals, cornerstone layings, funerals, etc. There is also *Predigtwürfe und nicht ganz ausgeführte Predigten und Casualreden* (St. Louis, 1891 and 1903).

Although he probably did not use it in his sermon preparation, yet Walther is said to have owned a copy of the *Complutensian Polyglot*. This information comes from Prof. Carl F. Weidmann of Concordia Col-

legiate Institute, Bronxville, whose father, the late Rev. F. W. Weidmann, was pastor of Walther's Trinity Church some 45 years ago. The *Polyglot* is said to have been presented to Walther about 1880—85 by his former students. If this is correct, where is it today?

Not many years ago there were many men who could remember Walther and who had heard him preach. They were all agreed that his sermons were of a very high order and that his delivery was singularly impressive. He is described as an unusually slender man, with a prominent nose and fiery eyes. He spoke with authority in the pulpit and in his lecture room. In daily life he was noted for his unusual politeness to all, his friendly disposition, his ability to do many things extremely well, and his almost neurotic thoroughness. He often quoted the old 17th-century dogmatists, and it was not unusual for him to sit up until almost daybreak, with a pigskin-bound volume as large as an old-fashioned family Bible before him, scanning the footnotes which are often more lengthy than the text itself. He would do this in order to verify the exact book, page, and line of some Latin citation he had come across.

Of his many hundreds of students, the only surviving one, as far as my knowledge goes, is the Rev. Dr. Francis Uplegger, of San Carlos, Ariz. He is 93 years old. When asked to give his impressions of Walther as a preacher, here is what Dr. Uplegger said:

"Dr. Walther conducted morning devotions in the theological seminary. *Seine Stimme war die Stimme der festen und beglückenden Überzeugung*. He had a captivating style of preaching. In the seriousness of his presentation one felt the

warm evangelical voice of the heart of a witness to Christ, calling everyone to live as God's child in fellowship with the heavenly Father.

"There was nothing sweetish about it. It was a strong, natural voice of experience that spoke out of the joyful conviction of the heart. He reproved and condemned sin with sympathetic regret that the most precious blessings of the Lord were not valued or did not find room in the hearts of many.

"Hearing him would quickly raise confidence in him as a man who sincerely loved the Lord and his fellow man for the Lord's sake."

The late Dr. J. H. C. Fritz calls Walther "not only an eminent theologian, but also a very forceful and successful preacher." (*CTM*, VII [Oct. 1936], 748)

"His influence has been greater than that of any other American Lutheran clergyman of the 19th century," declares the Rev. George H. Genzmer in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, XIX (New York, 1936).

"Walther is a model preacher in the Lutheran Church. How different the position of the Lutheran Church would be in Germany were many such sermons delivered!" So writes Albert R. Brömel of Kiel. "He is as orthodox as Johann Gerhard, but likewise as fervid as a Pietist, as correct in his style as a university or a court preacher, and yet as popular as Luther himself. If the Lutheran Church is to take her teachings once more to the people,

then she must become as faithful and certain in her doctrine and as authoritative and as timely as is the case with Walther. Walther is a model preacher for the Lutheran Church." This, and more, may be found in Brömel's two-volume work, *Homiletische Charakterbilder* (Berlin and Leipzig, 1869, 1874), in which he begins with the ancient church fathers and ends with Walther.

"Great was Walther as a preacher," declares the Rev. Martin Günther. "His sermons were fundamental, instructive, and at once popular and edifying. He makes no attempt to tickle the ears or to parade his eloquence, but spirited, persuasive, revealing, transporting is his manner of speech." (*Dr. C. F. W. Walther, Lebensbild* [St. Louis, 1890], p. 177)

When the Lutherans are called upon to answer for their sins of omission, at the head of the list will be their failure to translate in an entirely unabridged form the works of our great dogmaticians, from Martin Chemnitz to David Hollaz. Next on the list of our sins of omission will be our failure to translate the sermons and other writings of such noted evangelical leaders as Walther and Stoeckhardt. We wring our hands when we think of the shelves of homiletical rubbish that form the working libraries of the present generation when we have gifted princes of the pulpit of our own. May the day be not far distant when their writings, theological and homiletical, are translated into the language of the land.

Mount Vernon, N. Y.